

Valles Caldera National Preserve

Listening Session #2

Jemez Valley Community Center

February 22, 2001 6:00 - 9:00 pm

Summary of Discussion

Facilitator/Recorder: Lucy Moore

Welcome and Introductions: Bill deBuys, acting chair and member of the board of the Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP), welcomed the group to the listening session and expressed appreciation on behalf of the board to all those who took time to come and offer their thoughts on the future of the VCNP. Bill asked the other Board members present to introduce themselves.

Present were: Bob Armstrong, Leonard Atencio, Karen Durkovich, Palemon Martinez, Stephen D. Stoddard, Thomas W. Swetnam, David Yepa. Dennis Vasquez was absent due to illness.]

Background: Bill introduced a brief video which gave background on the creation of the VCNP, and set the stage for discussion about its future.

DISCUSSION: Following the video, Lucy Moore welcomed the group, offered groundrules for the discussion, and explained her role as facilitator and recorder. A summary of the discussion would be sent to everyone who signed in, she explained, in order to keep in touch with residents of the Valley. The Board would want to continue the dialogue with those who attend the Listening Sessions, as their thinking evolves.

In general, the comments during the evening fell into three categories: visions for the future use of the VCNP, fears about the impacts to the community, and suggestions for management and decision-making processes. The comments summarized below do not represent any consensus among participants at the Listening Session.

VISIONS FOR THE VCNP: There was much discussion about the future use of the Valles Caldera, focusing on the following themes:

Multiple Uses in Moderation: Many favored multiple uses for the property for reasons of wise stewardship and equity among the variety of users with an interest in the Valles Caldera. The uses could include, in moderation, timber cutting, ranching, mining, cross-country skiing, and hiking. "Don't overdo anything - I don't want to see trails everywhere, or cattle everywhere," offered a participant.

Another local resident reminded the group that "there is a time and space for everything to happen." "Everyone has a right to be there," he added, "in a certain time and space."

Over population of the VCNP - by wildlife like elk, or by visitors - may lead to a weakness of the ecology of the area and an increase in disease among both plants and wildlife.

Recreation/Cross-country Skiing: Some feared that too many skiers could damage the land, and that numbers should be limited. One participant envisioned a cross-country hut system, where skiers could ski from one hut to another, similar to areas in Utah and Colorado. It was suggested that recreation be limited, by numbers, or by requiring tours, to minimize the impact on wildlife. Some feared that hiking and skiing trails would encourage people to go farther than they would be able, and that the result would be injuries and costly rescues.

Working Ranch: Many shared a vision of a working ranch at the former Baca Ranch, for reasons of cultural and historical continuity, and economic return for the VCNP. Former ranch workers spoke about the importance of the Baca as a ranch in the past, and pointed out to the Board that there is a great deal of expertise available to help with the planning and implementation of a working ranch.

In the past, a system of holding pastures allowed ranch hands to move thousands of head of cattle through the rangeland without damaging the property. A participant spoke in favor of including grass bank opportunities in the VCNP uses.

Logging: Historically, there were many jobs in the timber industry on the Baca Ranch, many of them not available to locals, depending on the management era. As with the ranch workers, there is valuable expertise in the local logging community, like Archie McKeller who has logged in the area with minimal impact to the environment. The Board should use skills like these in their management decisions, and establish policies which support the hiring of local people. (Scott Butrum was nominated to fly the Board over some of these areas.)

Hunting: A participant recommended a one-time draw each year, focusing on younger bulls and cows, rather than depleting the trophy animals. Another suggested a moderate level of hunting - "more than the Valle Vidal, less than there used to be on the Baca."

Wildlife Center: A participant encouraged the Board to consider setting aside a number of acres for a wildlife center, where injured wildlife could be rehabilitated and the public could be educated on the value of wildlife and ecosystem management.

New Mexico Forestry Camp: The Cuba Soil and Water Conservation District sponsors a forestry camp each summer for youth 13 - 19 years old. They hope for a camp facility on the property in the future, and perhaps an interim arrangement for field trips before then.

Water Storage: A participant said he would like to see the Valle full of water for both recreation and irrigation storage purposes.

Preservation as is: A local resident spoke in favor of leaving the property the way it is. She would hate to see it criss-crossed with trails, and prefers to think that after we are all gone, the Valles Caldera will remain the way it is now.

Protect Historic Buildings: Buildings with historic value need to be protected and preserved. Depending on the uses, some could serve as museums or historic sites for visitors to learn about the history of the property and area.

Affordability and Accessibility: Many spoke of the need to make the property accessible and affordable to a wide variety of users, including those with disabilities. Although it was suggested that motorized vehicles be limited to existing roads, it was understood that motorized wheelchairs and carts for the disabled would be allowed elsewhere. There was a request for trails that would be

accessible to the disabled. "We are a significant portion of the population," said one participant, "and we're going to the Baca. We just hope the Baca will be ready for us!"

Those from other areas, like Cuba and Espanola, requested that some of the property be open for them to graze or log.

Participants asked the Board to provide access to a valuable, but currently inoperable, repeater station which is on a mountain within the VCNP. Repairs to the station would be "a massive help" to those involved in search and rescue missions, and should be done as soon as possible.

Quiet and Noisy Periods: A participant suggested that the property be managed for different uses during different months, so that there would be "quiet months" and "noisy months."

Signage: A participant asked that the VCNP, and the roads to it, not be so well announced with signs that the view is spoiled.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE COMMUNITIES: Those who spoke at the Listening Session were very concerned about the potential impacts to the area from use and management decisions of the Board. Their communities will serve as the "gateway" to the highly visible new recreation area, and they are poorly equipped to deal with the demands of that new role.

Traffic: Already a problem in the summer, the traffic will increase when the area is open to visitors. There are stretches of the road that cannot be widened to accommodate heavy traffic flow, and locals fear impossible bottlenecks that will make leading a normal life very difficult.

A spokesperson from Jemez Pueblo also expressed concerns about the volume of traffic through the Pueblo in tourist seasons.

Emergency Medical Care: Again, residents feel ill-equipped now to deal with emergencies, especially if there is more than one at a time. It was said that the area currently sees two million visitors a year, and when the VCNP is open and teeming with even more tourists they fear for their ability to handle accidents and injuries of those visitors, as well as workers and local residents. The all-volunteer responders are already stressed to the breaking point. EMS staff and facilities must be increased. The group identified many specific needs, including a paid transport ambulance at the north end of the corridor (La Cueva area) available round the clock, and a roving "Wilderness EMT" stationed on the Baca to reach accidents quickly. (A participant was ready to apply for this position on the spot.) Spokespersons for the Emergency Medical Services in the area asked the Board to talk with the County about ways of supporting emergency medical response on and around the VCNP.

Economy: Many fear that the visitors to the area will not contribute in any significant way to the local economy, using restrooms along the way, and buying very little beyond "a bottle of water and a granola bar."

Maintenance Needs: Local residents are concerned that there will be major maintenance needs for the VCNP once it is opened up to the public. Litter and vandalism may be significant problems.

Future Stability of VCNP: A participant said he feared that the VCNP might be seriously in arrears in the future, and that the community might be burdened with a failed effort.

MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING: There was interest in the future management of the property and the role of the Board and local communities in making management decisions.

Coordination: There was concern that the multiple needs of the users and the needs of the impacted communities be balanced in a fair way. "The Board needs to act like a board in coordinating these different interests," offered one participant. The was also urged to work closely with local government - incorporated areas, county and tribal - to resolve the impact issues.

Communication: Those attending the Listening Session were very appreciative of the Board's commitment to include local voices in their decision-making process, and urged the Board to continue the conversation as the management plan is developed. The Board is building a mailing list and an email listserve, and is currently using the Santa Fe National Forest website for announcements and information. They expect to open an office soon.

A participant asked for a directory of special interest groups in the area surrounding the VCNP, so that those organizing could have a way of contacting others.

Another participant suggested that greater numbers of people could be reached through a survey than through meetings, and asked the Board to communicate by mail with the 1,700 addresses in the valley.

Priority of Local Voices and Needs: Many urged the board to listen first to the local voices, representing those communities who will be most heavily impacted by the development of the Valles Caldera. They also asked that first choice of grazing permits, grass bank access, and other uses be given to locals, "who know the most about the Baca."

Members of the Pueblo of Jemez emphasized that the culture and history of the area are rich, and must be protected. They offered the Board their help and cooperation in this task.

Value of Local Expertise: Several times during the meeting participants mentioned local experts on ranching, logging and land management who should be valuable resources to the Board in its decision-making about uses, and its development of a management plan. Local loggers, for instance, have logged productively by cutting and not burning, and left little impact on the land. Emmett Cart of the Cuba Soil and Water Conservation District offered the Board his organization's assistance and conservation experience on the Baca.

Take Time to Plan: Many asked the Board to take its time, and develop a plan carefully, and with ongoing public participation. Taking time to make decisions in partnership with the communities will give area residents a level of confidence that their needs are being considered and addressed.

Satellite and Aerial Photos: A participant told the Board that valuable information can be found in satellite and aerial photos of the area, and urged that the planning process use this resource.

Interim Management: There was interest in how the Board would decide to use the property before the plan was completed. Some felt that these years before decisions are made could serve as a window in time when people could "see the beauty of the ranch, before it is changed." There was support for allowing some "local only" access to the land during this interim period for hiking, skiing, or hunting. Some felt this would be an appropriate period for disabled access to the property.

The Cuba Soil and Water Conservation District asked that they be allowed to bring their forestry camp youth onto the property for a field trip this summer.

Several participants felt there is an urgent need for elk population control, and that a local lottery should be held in this interim period. Other ideas for breaking up the elk herds in the VCNP included driving cattle through, and dropping firecrackers out of helicopters.

There were questions about the numbers of elk, and general agreement that determining the number is difficult, with estimates ranging from 6,000 to 20,000. The Board said that they will communicate closely with "Seeking Common Ground," an initiative to find acceptable solutions to the elk problem.

Summary written by Lucy Moore. Please contact her with any comments or corrections.
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Potential partners and sources of help:

The following groups offered to partner with the VCNP in a variety of ways

Gateway Coalition:

Los Alamos Chamber of Commerce
Los Alamos County Council
Bandelier National Monument
Friends of Bandelier
Los Alamos National Lab
University of California
University of New Mexico at Los Alamos
UNM Small Business Development Center
Lodgers Tax Board
Los Alamos Public Schools
Los Alamos Historical Society
Pajarito Environmental Education Center
Multi-agency Volunteer Task Force - John Hogan 662-5052, or Craig Martin 672-1962
Los Alamos Vision 20/20
Los Alamos Ski Patrol Search and Rescue
Wildlife Center - POBox 246, Espanola, NM, Dr. K. Ramsey, 753-9505
Back Country Horsemen - Chris Atkinson 689-2402
Los Alamos Nordic Club
Velo del Norte Cycling
Valles Caldera Rim Trail - 662-2662
Trout Unlimited, Truchas Chapter
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
New Mexican Stockmen's Association
Northern New Mexican Stockmen's Association - M.R.Pacheco 758-3168
Chicama Livestock Association - 753-1783
Ghost Ranch
Quivira Coalition
Museum of Natural History in Albuquerque
Los Alamos Pathways Association

Southwest 4WD Association
New Mexico Trout (Albuquerque)
National Park Service, National Natural Landmarks Program
New Mexico Wildlife Federation

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